

Doing Theology Among the Ibanags

Clifford Peters

The Philippine Islands are home to dozens of tribal groups like the Ibanags who consider themselves Catholic but who are very much animists. In this article Clifford Peters describes the Ibanags and their worldview and offers guidelines for doing theology among such a people.

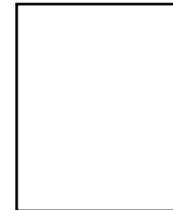
The Ibanag people live in the province of Isabela in the northeastern part of the Philippine island of Luzon. Nestled within low mountain ranges—the Sierra Madre on the east, the Cordillera Central on the west, and the Caraballo on the south—is the Cagayan Valley where most Ibanags are found. The Cagayan River runs northward through this valley and from it the people have acquired their name. *Y Bannag* literally used to mean *the river*, and over time *Ibanag* (or *Ybanag*) eventually became the term by which to refer to the people living along its banks.

Isabela is somewhat of a melting pot, with inhabitants coming from several mountain tribes and lowland groups. Ibanag is a commonly spoken language, but one may also hear Ilocano, Yogad, Gaddang, Itawes, Tagalog, or Pangasinan. Only a handful of towns are composed solely of Ibanags; these include Cabagan, San Pablo, Santa Maria, and Tumauni.

Of these, Cabagan is the largest, with a population of about 25,000 in 1975. It is considered the educational center of Northern Isabela with four high schools, a Catholic college (Lyceum of Cabagan), and Isabela State University (one of a chain of state agricultural universities scattered across the Philippines).

Many Ibanags are subsistence farmers, growing rice, corn, and tobacco. The land is heavily used, and productivity is very low. Most of those who grow tobacco fall prey to Chinese merchants, who advance money to the farmers for their future crops and then buy the crops at low prices, often making 100% profit. Beneficial credit systems are not available to most farmers.

Ibanags have extensive kinship networks and seek to main-



Clifford Peters has spent several years in the Philippines. He is currently completing his B.A. degree in International Development from the William Carey International University in Pasadena, California, USA.

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tain smooth interpersonal relationships. They are bound by loyalties and obligations to the clan and will sacrifice personal desires for those of the group.

Most Ibanags consider themselves Catholics but, as will be shown, many of the animistic beliefs and the basic worldview of the Ibanag have remained largely unchanged in the 400 years since the Spanish came to the area. Catholic rituals and objects have been absorbed into the culture; for example, images of patron saints have become abodes of spirits which need to be appeased. The Catholic emphasis on the wounds of Jesus has served to reinforce the preexisting fear of evil spirits and of what they can do to a person.

Ibanag Worldview

The Ibanag refers to the world around him as *interu sinak-kabban*, meaning “the whole covered region.” This is divided into the *langi* (sky), *bilag* (sun), *vulan* (moon), *aru nga bitun* (stars), *davvun* (earth), *unag na davvun* (inside the earth), and *pallefan* (surroundings) (Gatan 1983:35)

The *davvun* is very important to the Ibanag, for from it he ekes out a living for himself and his family. It includes the mountains, valleys, forests, springs, and rivers. The river especially plays an important role in his life since the yearly flooding deposits the rich soil in which he grows his crops and then supplies the water to keep them growing. The floods can also destroy his crops and animals.

It's perhaps not surprising, then, that the Cagayan River plays an important role in the rituals and beliefs of the Ibanag. For example, after birth, the placenta is floated away in the river in hopes that the child will have better fortune through marriage to someone outside of the confines of the town. Articles used in healing rites or left behind after death are also thrown into the river to symbolize cleansing and the carrying away of bad luck, disease, and misfortune.

The *pallefan* is also of great importance to Ibanags. It refers to the environmental surroundings and includes trees, fields, forests, hills, natural outcroppings, and the atmosphere. The Ibanag also believes these surroundings to be the dwelling places of a multitude of evil spirits, nature deities, and disembodied souls. This perception of the spirit world is deeply embedded in the culture and affects virtually everything an Ibanag does. The following is a description of the main types of spirits known to Ibanags and their influence in the culture:

**Ari-masingan* (also known as *agguiriguira* and *angul*) are evil spirits believed to dwell in big trees, rivers, riverbanks,

trails, crossroads, and deserted houses. They are thought to be particularly active at noon and dusk. Fear of these is very real and intense. Though these spirits are invisible, they and their children can be affected by corporeal events. For example, they can be stepped on, urinated on, and otherwise hurt or disturbed. If one was to pass by their dwelling without asking permission of them, they would become offended and angry. Mothers are careful not to clothe their little girls in colorful dresses which can attract the attention of these beings. When people eat or drink anything around areas suspected of spirit habitation, morsels of food are thrown to the ground for the *ari-masingan* as a form of appeasement to prevent evil events.

If ever an *ari-masingan* is provoked to anger, it will touch the offender. This is thought to cause such a fright that the person's soul strays from the body. Someone who is *natukkal*—touched by evil spirits—may exhibit sickness, coma, jerking in his sleep, or involuntary physical contortions. Rituals must be performed to woo back the person's straying soul. Alternatively, if the spirit is very angry, it may possess the person. This is known as *inaffunan*—literally, roosted upon by an evil spirit. More complicated rituals must be performed to appease and propitiate the offended spirit.

Another thing to fear from an *ari-masingan* is being walked over by one. If this were to happen to a single woman sleeping at the threshold of the main doorway at noontime, she would become pregnant with an inhuman form of life such as a dog or snake. Fear of being walked over has grown to include even other people. Walking over someone is believed to displace your bad luck to the one walked over. If you were to step over a child, for instance, the parents would become very angry and order you to walk over the child backwards to neutralize the evil effect of your action.

*The *amangao* spirit is feared at least as much as the *ari-masingan* because its touch can be fatal. It can assume the form of various animals and even a tall human form with the head of a horse. Thought to dwell in thick bamboo groves, old trees, and haunted houses, it usually appears at twilight in lonely places in drizzling rain. When seen, it grows in size, changing in form from a small cat to larger animals and eventually to a huge human-like figure, sometimes emitting frightful sounds. Some are said to have chased their intended victims to the ladders of their houses, caused them to become extremely ill and even sometimes to die. The fright from encounters with *amangao* can also cause soul-straying.

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*The *pabilon* spirit appears as a massive blanket during rainfall in the early evening. It swoops down on the victim and causes illness.

*The *aran* are roughly equivalent to leprechauns and may be either harmful or beneficial. They are thought to be short, kinky-haired, and dark-complexioned and to wear tall hats. Believed to be harbingers of prosperity and abundance, they supposedly provide an inexhaustible food supply to the family in whose granary they dwell. Virtually all Ibanags, no matter how educated and exposed to the influence of science and technology, believe in these elusive beings, and it is the unstated lifetime wish of an Ibanag to actually see an *aran* for himself. This is difficult because when an *aran* becomes aware that he's being observed, he instantly disappears! When throwing out hot water, Ibanags will warn any *arans* thought to be in the area to stay clear; a scalded *aran* will retaliate by causing a skin disease which only a healer can cure.

*The *banig* spirit is like a ghost, the fear of which is often used in disciplining children.

**Liminikug* are the spirits of ancestors, the departed dead. Ibanags long to renew ties with the dead, so when someone dies, their spirit is invited to join the living. These spirits are thought to always be near and involved in the affairs of the living. Dreams are believed to be events whereby the dead make their presence felt in order to be remembered. After such a dream, members of the kinship network get together to pray and offer a food offering to the dead. Often during these gatherings, someone (usually a woman—Ibanags would think it amusing if a man were chosen) will lose consciousness and begin speaking with the voice of an ancestor. The invading personality is not feared but welcomed and subjected to an ordeal of questioning. The spirit almost always ends up reconciling kinfolk of their unsettled differences, advising them to serve and love one another and to preserve the bonds of unity.

How Ibanags Deal With the Spirits

The average Ibanag believes he must appease the spirits and approach them with fear and deference. From the cradle he is taught the spirits' power and presence, and as he grows up they play a dominant role in his social conditioning. Jocano, in his study of a similar Filipino group, says,

There are rules governing social and moral activities in the barrio that reinforce kinship ties. These rules are an-

chored to a set of beliefs concerning the existence of supernatural beings. These nonhumans, who inhabit the surrounding world, participate actively in the daily affairs of man. They cause illness and misfortune to those who do not observe the rules of conduct; they reward those who are obedient and faithful. Thus the people...must square accounts with the spirits by observing the conventional norms of behavior if they are to live in security and peace in the barrio. The...society is viewed as a small part of a wider natural-social universe inhabited partly by spirits and partly by humans. The social prescription for so many human actions is felt to come from metaphysical demands. The pattern of social life is fixed because it is part of the general order of the universe, and even if this were hardly understood and regarded as mysterious, it is nevertheless accepted as invariant and regular (Jocano 1969:104).

Ibanags perform a variety of rituals to restore good relationships with the spirits when they are thought to have been offended. Physical and mental illness, unusual behavior, or loss of control are signs that the spirits are angry with someone and that appeasement rituals need to be performed. The following rituals are some of the most common:

**Mangagagakao* is the ritual prescribed for soul fright, when the soul is thought to have strayed away from the body as evidenced by jerking in the sleep, fever, or other signs of illness. A ritualist may be called in to perform the rite. The lost soul is called back to the body and is thought to have returned when newly-husked rice dropped into a saucer of water fuses together in one spot. The rice is then dried, tied into a handkerchief, and pinned to the clothes of the sick person. If the fever continues, the person is assumed to have been "touched" by an evil spirit (considered a mild form of possession), and then the next ritual is performed.

**Wari* is an offering to the *ari-masingan* (evil spirits) to induce them to leave the person. The offering consists of wine, cigars, pieces of candy and chewing items, and biscuits, all placed on red cloth or paper. At dusk, it is placed at the supposed dwelling place of the offended spirit. If goosebumps break out all over the body of the person making the offering, it is considered to have been accepted. For an illness that still does not go away, and in severe cases evidencing obvious signs of possession by an evil spirit, the next ritual is observed.

*After consulting a healer, Ibanags undertake the ritual of

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mamottag tu gaki—literally “floating a raft.” The idea is to coax the spirit out of the person and onto a small raft containing various offerings, including a live white chicken, cooked meat and rice, and other items prescribed by the previous ritual. At dusk, followed by a four-piece marching band, the possessed person’s father carries the raft on his head from the house down to the Cagayan river. There he gently floats it out into the current and it goes on its way to the China Sea, hopefully carrying the spirit with it. This is a costly and complex undertaking, and it is cause for consternation if the person still doesn’t get well. One ritual is left if this occurs.

**Magallag* involves two specialized healers who are called in to woo other evil spirits into healing the person. More paraphernalia and more chickens, wine, and food are required. The ritualists dance, sing, beat gongs, and shout stories of heroic exploits. The father is required to shout stories of being frightened. Chicken blood is mixed with wine and placed on the foreheads of each family member, then rice cake is put in a tin can and thrown out the window to be caught by one of the bystanders. This is an expensive ritual that not all can afford. Sometimes the person gets well, sometimes he does not.

Doing Theology Among the Ibanags

Various Christian groups have attempted to bring the gospel to the Ibanag people but for the most part have had little success. The centuries-old traditions, rituals, and worldview have remained largely intact since the earliest recorded contacts over 400 years ago. Gatan quotes observations recorded in 1640 of Ibanag rituals similar to those described above (1983:16). A Protestant church was established about 60 years ago in Cabagan but has few members and little influence in the community.

However educated and modern, Ibanags still perceive problems as spirit-related, and so they place little trust in Western medicine and technology. This is particularly understandable in cases of spirit possession since the Western scientific worldview denies the existence of such spirits and thus has little to offer by way of help and hope. It must be noted, however, that Ibanag rituals often not only do not help the afflicted person but cause the condition to worsen (Gatan 1983:127,196,214).

I believe that the gospel has made little impact among the Ibanags because those who have attempted to introduce Jesus Christ to them have not adequately addressed their belief system. The Ibanags have absorbed or ignored competing belief

systems, perceiving them to lack power and relevance. The need is for the gospel to be contextualized, the power of Christ to be demonstrated, and the deep felt needs of this people to be addressed.

How can this be done? I concur with Kraft that the basic change upon which transformational processes are built is the change in allegiance. This “issues in a concomitant change in the evaluational principles within the person’s/group’s worldview and a resultant series of new habits of behavior” (1981:348). For the Ibanags, the required change is from allegiance to environmental spirits to a faith in Jesus Christ, the King of the spirits and the One who has overcome them. As to how this should occur, I cannot envision any scenario that does not include a power encounter demonstrating Christ’s power and victory. Conn’s sixth criterion for doing theology—that it must be prophetic, addressing dehumanizing and demonic agendas of rebellion against God (1984:257)—would seem to have its application here.

Such encounters might include several things in order to maximize the impact: the afflicted person’s family would be present as they would at their traditional rituals; upon demonstration of the power of Christ over the evil spirits there would be a call to the delivered person and all present to give their allegiance to Jesus Christ and forsake all dealings with the evil spirits who are His enemies; as a symbol of their acceptance of Christ those responding to the call would be asked to bring their ritual paraphernalia and idols and burn them (see Acts 19:17-20, where the Ephesians burned their sorcery scrolls and “in this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power”); and then arrangements would be made for regular gatherings for fellowship and instruction from the Bible.

The situation seems to have close parallels to Judea in Jesus’ time. When He sent out the Twelve, He gave them authority over evil spirits; when they went out, they not only preached that people should repent but “they drove out many demons and anointed many sick people with oil and healed them” (Mark 6:13). It would appear that extensive worldview changes came about as a result of these encounters as news of them even reached civil authorities. Similar events occurred after Pentecost with the apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 5:16), when Philip went to Samaria (Acts 8:5-8), and in other instances.

Such power encounters could deliver the Ibanags from bondage to fear and give them a new stance of victory and au-

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thority in Christ. Rapid behavioral changes could occur as the new converts reevaluate many aspects of their lives. Loving fellowship centered on the Word of God would give stability and new group identity. Given the dynamics of the extensive kinship networks, news would travel fast—the potential is there for large numbers of Ibanags to be brought into the Kingdom of God in a relatively short period of time. Most of the civic and religious leaders (and other opinion leaders) are included within those kinship networks, and, as Kraft indicates (1981:365), it would be advantageous for them to early be included among those submitting their lives to the rule of God.

Other Important Issues

Secondary issues would be expected to arise soon after the number of converts begins to grow. These issues would require much thought and prayer—among expatriate workers and Ibanags alike. While there is not space in this essay to adequately address such questions, here is a brief listing of those I would anticipate:

*The need for Bibles in their own language will quickly become apparent. To my knowledge, there are only a few copies of the Bible in Ibanag, and the translation is old and possibly in need of revision. Early attention to the need for Bible translation and distribution could be a crucial factor in ensuring the opportunity for continued growth of the new disciples and ongoing progress in contextualization. One must, as Kraft says, “...encourage change in such a way that...attention is devoted, on the one hand, to providing the Scriptures in their language and, on the other, to providing instruction in how to use the Scriptures in direct dependence upon the Holy Spirit as their point of reference for Christian transformational change” (1981:366).

*A thorough study of the relationship between soul and body would be needed and suitable teaching developed.

*Issues of poverty and injustice will surface, especially among subsistence farmers whose only access to credit is from unscrupulous merchants who seek to keep them in debt. Farmers’ co-ops and credit unions could possibly be formed to break such patterns.

*What is the role of the Catholic church in all of this? Do the new converts stay in it as agents of change and revitalization? Or do they leave and go to the Protestant church, which is somewhat of a misfit in the community? Or do they form a new church which carries a new identity, e.g., the Family of

God?

*How does one practically deal with conflicts of loyalty and obligation resulting from membership in two kinship groups (physical family and spiritual family) with substantially different worldviews?

*Child discipline is traditionally carried out by cultivating fear of evil spirits. New means must be developed and families given support and reinforcement of new values.

*Agricultural rituals—at planting, harvest, and changes in the moon, for example—need to be examined. Should they be discarded completely or Christianized somehow?

*How does one deal with the episodes of communication with dead ancestors (see *liminikug* above) which are not feared but welcomed and thought to reinforce highly-valued kinship ties?

*Alternative ways of viewing and dealing with illness may need to be developed. Prayer for the sick, clinics, medicinal plant gardens, provision of clean water supplies, and sanitation facilities should be considered.

*The significance of the river in the lives of the people should be explored for possible parallels in Biblical faith and for the development of rituals filled with Christian meanings e.g., Ezek.47:1-12; Psa.1:3; Jer.17:7,8; Rev.22:1,2).

*Indigenous forms of communication should be explored for use in teaching and evangelism. Two good possibilities are the *zarsuela* and *parosa*, very powerful musical and dramatic presentations which draw large crowds. This type of presentation definitely appeals to right-brain dominant cultures. Their use faded during the Marcos regime, but they might be revitalized now.

I noted earlier that missionaries have enjoyed little success in changing the worldview of the Ibanag. Recent developments involving Kuya Nanding and the *Lakas Angkan* (Power of the Extended Family) movement may prove to be the keys to opening the door to the gospel and effecting deep-level changes. Successful power encounters with evil spirits have taken place and word has spread quickly through kinship networks. Home Bible study groups have been formed, and many have shown interest in participating. I pray that this may be the beginning of a great movement of God among the Ibanag people and that many may be delivered from the kingdom of darkness into the glorious freedom of the sons of God.

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Author's address: 1539 E. Howard St., Pasadena, CA 91104, USA.
